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Does Matthew 18:15–16 Apply to Public Sins? The Steps of Admonition Today and in Lutheran Orthodoxy

BENJAMIN T. G. MAYES



Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” (Mt 18:15–16)

THESE VERSES IN MATTHEW have been at the center of some recent debates within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). The 2004 synodical convention of the LCMS adopted new rules for the discipline of synod members (professional church workers and congregations) in Resolution 8-01A, among the contents of which is an interpretation of Matthew 18:15–16, the first two “steps of admonition,” in which the steps of admonition are required for all cases of church discipline. This essay will examine the understanding of the steps of admonition found in key representatives of Lutheran Orthodoxy. In short, the Lutheran theological tradition has not seen Matthew 18:15–16 as applying to all cases of church discipline indiscriminately. The steps of admonition apply to secret, hidden sins, not to public, manifest sins.

Modern commentaries on Matthew 18:15–16 often do not address a distinction between secret and public sins.¹ One of the few commentaries from the twentieth century that mentions this distinction is by R. C. H. Lenski. He writes, “If one brother sinned against must take action as Jesus directs, then likewise must several, if the sin be against more, and the Church as such, if the sin be public from the start.”²

Perhaps the “commentary” genre is not the right place to turn. Commentaries must often limit the amount of detail they devote to the text. In addition, modern commentaries are often more interested in grammatical detail than in the application of the text to the life of the church. Instead of relying only on modern commentaries, it may be helpful to see how the steps of admonition from Matthew 18:15–16 were understood in early Lutheranism. To do this, a historical order will be followed, examining statements by Martin Luther, followed by one of the first manuals of Lutheran pastoral practice, and then two collections of early Lutheran casuistry. Finally, statements by C. F. W. Walther on the issue will be considered.

LUTHER

Luther’s view on Matthew 18:15–17 is confessed and codified for the Lutheran Church in his Large Catechism. There, commenting on the Eighth Commandment, he writes,

But the true way in this matter would be to observe the order according to the Gospel, Matt. 18, 15, where Christ says: *If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone.* Here you have a precious and excellent teaching for governing well the tongue, which is to be carefully observed against this detestable misuse. Let this, then, be your rule, that you do not too readily spread evil concerning your neighbor and slander him to others, but admonish him privately that he may amend [his life]. Likewise, also, if some one report to you what this or that one has done, teach him, too, to go and admonish him personally, if he have seen it himself; but if not, that he hold his tongue.

The same you can learn also from the daily government of the household. For when the master of the house sees that the servant does not do what he ought, he admonishes him personally. But if he were so foolish as to let the servant sit at home, and went on the streets to complain of him to his neighbors, he would no doubt be told: “You fool, what does that concern us? Why do you not tell it to him?” Behold, that would be acting quite brotherly, so that the evil would be stayed, and your neighbor would retain his honor. As Christ also says in the same place: *If he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.* Then you have done a great and excellent work; for do you think it is a little matter to gain a brother? Let all monks and holy orders step forth, with all their works melted together into one mass, and see if they can boast that they have gained a brother.

Here it is obvious that Luther sees the steps of admonition as serving to retain the erring brother’s honor by keeping a secret sin secret. Luther continues,

Further, Christ teaches: *But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.* So he whom it concerns is always to be treated with personally, and not to be spoken of without his knowledge. But if that do not avail, then bring it publicly before the community, whether

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before the civil or the ecclesiastical tribunal (*Gericht*). For then you do not stand alone, but you have those witnesses with you by whom you can convict the guilty one, relying on whom the judge can pronounce sentence and punish. This is the right and regular course for checking and reforming a wicked person. But if we gossip about another in all corners, and stir the filth, no one will be reformed, and afterwards when we are to stand up and bear witness, we deny having said so. Therefore it would serve such tongues right if their itch for slander were severely punished, as a warning to others. If you were acting for your neighbor's reformation or from love of the truth, you would not sneak about secretly nor shun the day and the light.

But then, Luther distinguishes public sins from secret sins:

All this has been said regarding secret sins. But where the sin is quite public so that the judge and everybody know it, you can without any sin avoid him and let him go, because he has brought himself into disgrace, and you may also publicly testify concerning him. For when a matter is public in the light of day, there can be no slandering or false judging or testifying; as, when we now reprove the Pope with his doctrine, which is publicly set forth in books and proclaimed in all the world. For where the sin is public, the reproof must also be public, that every one may learn to guard against it. (LC I, 276–284)

Luther applies the steps of admonition to secret sins. Public ones, he says, must be rebuked publicly. Where the false teaching is manifest, such as in the books of the papists, the reproof must also be public. This is the Lutheran confessional position.

For Porta, the steps of admonition are a way to keep the matter under wraps and thus make repentance easier for the offender.

Yet in an undated sermon on Matthew 18:15–17, Luther takes the words “If your (singular) brother sins against you (singular)” as being a public sin, concerning which, nevertheless, one must preserve secrecy during the steps of admonition (SL 7: 919–920; cf. WA 47: 269–279). According to Kurt Aland, the sermon is to be dated between 1537 and 1540.³ It seems that Luther is saying something different here than what he wrote in the Large Catechism in 1529. One cannot expect Luther always to be perfectly consistent, yet one does wonder why he would say this. Although any explanation must remain pure conjecture, perhaps Luther changed his mind after writing the Large Catechism. Perhaps he was exaggerating. Perhaps *public* here means *apparent*, that is, known to you, but not to the public in general.

The latter may in fact be the case. Though Luther speaks of the sin as *öffentlich* (SL 7: 919), he then speaks of it as if it was known to you alone, and not to the public in general.⁴ However this sermon of Luther may be explained, the Large Catechism is the confessional position of the Lutheran Church. Later Lutheranism certainly followed the position of the Large Catechism.

CONRAD PORTA

One of the first books of Lutheran pastoral theology to be written was by Conrad Porta (1541–1585), a parish pastor in Eisleben, Germany.⁵ His book, *Pastorale Lutheri* (*Luther's Pastoral Theology*), was in effect several books combined into one. It was a book on casuistry, pastoral theology, and an anthology of Luther quotes that could serve almost as an index to Luther's writings. The book was popular enough to have been reprinted all the way into the nineteenth century.

Porta makes it very clear that preachers must rebuke false teachers and false teachings.⁶ He quotes Luther on 1 Peter 5, where Luther writes, “But if I just preach rightly and feed and teach the sheep well, the sheep have, nevertheless, not been protected well enough so that wolves do not come and drag them away.”⁷ The preachers have the duty to preach the law to all, regardless of social standing. God has reserved the right to rebuke vice and wrongs. Luther is quoted again, “For forgiveness of sins is invalid, except alone where the sins are recognized and confessed.”⁸ For Luther and Porta, church discipline is important not only for the sake of obedience to the purity of God's word, but also for the sake of the salvation of the erring brother.

Porta, with Luther, is aware that when pastors rebuke sins, they can sometimes be seen as rebellious and divisive. Porta points out, however, that the prophets of Israel rebuked even the kings and princes (Heb 1:4). Luther states, “They always call it rebellious when the lords are rebuked with God's Word and are not left free to do what they want, and are not praised and honored in their evil plans.”⁹

When Porta puts forth the question dealing with what kind of legal proceeding should be used before proceeding to public excommunication, he answers from Matthew 18. The first step is, if your brother sins against you, go to him and rebuke (*straffe*) him between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother.¹⁰ But how are the words of Matthew 18:17, “Tell it to the Church (*Gemeinde*)” to be understood? Aside from Chrysostom and other teachers of the ancient church, Porta recommends the *Pastoral Theology* of Erasmus Sarcerius (1501–1559).¹¹

Sarcerius, a Lutheran pastor in Leipzig and elsewhere, says that the church is not only pastors and other clergy, but also laity (that is, God-fearing, pious, and honorable laity). But for the sake of order, in case the offender might still want to repent, the details of the case should not be told to the whole church, but rather to the “elders and leaders of the church,” that is, the chief representatives both of the clergy and of the laity.¹² The work of this group, then, is to bear (on behalf of the Church) the power and might to consider and decide cases, and to hold public hearings in matters of religion where scandals and controversies come up. The group's authority also extends to sins and blasphemies that may become a scandal and a detriment to the

church. If there was not such a group, after the first and second steps of Matthew 18, the matter would have to be brought to the attention of the whole church. "For otherwise," Porta reports,

the sinner, on account of secret sins and vice, is first admonished secretly and fraternally and thereafter, where correction does not occur, these sins would have to be brought by two or three witnesses to the whole Church. In that case the sinner, from that moment on, would be exposed with his vice and would be disgraced, and hereby the improvement [sought] would actually be cut off and hindered by the third admonition and rebuke, rather than being furthered by it.¹³

Porta believes that using a disciplinary committee before proceeding to the third step of admonition would actually be more effective in bringing about repentance and avoiding the necessity of excommunication.¹⁴ It is obvious from all of this that for Porta, "tell it to the Church" means that a secret sin is now to be exposed. Thus, Matthew 18:15 and following is the governing text for sins and offences that are not widely known. For Porta, the steps of admonition serve not as Miranda rights for the offender, but instead they are a way to keep the matter under wraps and thus make repentance easier for the offender. Porta also approves of having a committee as an intermediate step before excommunication, and also perhaps to prevent the disciplinary process from being arbitrarily controlled by a small group of people.

Porta also speaks about whether the steps of admonition apply to manifest false doctrines. He asks: If the sectarians and fanatics want to debate, should honest teachers and preachers enter into debate with them? He then quotes Luther,

We are told that when the holy fathers at the Council of Nicaea heard the doctrine of the Arians read, all hissed unanimously, and would not listen or permit any argument or defense but condemned them out of hand, without disputation, as blasphemers. Moses in his Law commands that such blasphemers and indeed all false teachers should be stoned (Lv 24:16). So, in this case [when someone teaches against an article of the creed], there ought not to be much disputing; but such open blasphemers should be condemned without a hearing and without defense, as Paul commands (Ti 3:10): "A heretic is to be avoided and let go, after he has been admonished once or twice"; and he forbids Timothy to wrangle and dispute, since this has no effect, except to pervert those who hear (1 Tim 6:20). For these common articles of all Christendom have had hearing enough. They have been proved and decreed by the Scriptures and by the confession of the whole church, confirmed by many miracles, and sealed by the blood of many holy martyrs. They are testified to and defended in the books of all the doctors. They need no more discussion and clever interpretation.¹⁵

It is important to see what Luther is saying here. He is not saying that we should go around condemning people without

knowing what they say or whether they are in fact heretics. He is saying, however, that once we know that they are heretics and that they do not want to be converted, we should by no means debate with them any longer. For example: A man is brought into court and charged with theft. In court, it would be proper to debate and present evidence as to whether or not the man did the deed, and if he did, what his punishment should be. It would be wrong, however, to debate whether theft is actually a crime. So also, Luther's point is that for public wrongdoing in the spiritual realm (for example, public false doctrine), the steps of admonition of Matthew 18 are not applicable, since the Church already knows what the sin is. The rubric that applies is, instead, Titus 3:10. There, two or three admonitions are required. Privacy is not. This, of course, assumes that the facts of the matter are open for all to see.

The steps of admonition were thought to apply to cases of secret sins. In cases of public sins dealing with false doctrine, however, they do not apply.

From Porta and his quotations of Luther, we see that the steps of admonition were thought to apply to cases of secret sins. In cases of public sins dealing with false doctrine, however, they do not apply. Porta is also concerned to show the duty of every pastor to rebuke wrongdoing and false doctrine publicly.

LUDWIG DUNTE

The casuistry literature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheranism is another place to turn, in order to see how Matthew 18:15-16 was understood in the life of the Lutheran Church. One example of seventeenth-century Lutheran casuistry literature is Ludwig Dunte's *One Thousand and Six Cases of Conscience*.¹⁶ In this work, Dunte collects theological decisions by various Lutheran theological faculties, and by theologians such as Friedrich Balduin (1575-1627) and Johann Gerhard (1582-1637).¹⁷

Dunte makes explicit that the steps of admonition in Matthew 18 apply to sins that are known only to one person or a few, but not to public sins that are known to the whole world. Dunte asks,

Must a preacher only rebuke in general, or can he, in the case of public, well-known, and offensive sins, go into the specifics of the deed and depict sins and sinners in such a way that people understand what and whom is meant?¹⁸

He then quotes the Lutheran theological faculty of the University of Leipzig:

1. If this kind of scandalous sin is not yet known, the steps of admonition (*gradus admonitionum*) are to be observed before one rebukes publicly the specifics of the matter. And one must first remind the sinner of his sins with a gentle spirit; afterwards he should be brought before the entire ministerium, and also should be reproached, according to the matters which have taken place, in the presence of other pious people [that is, laity]. If all of this avails nothing, such a one can and shall thus be declared an object of aversion (*Abscheu*), so that everyone may observe it.

2. But if the sin and the sinner are already known publicly, so that people are singing and speaking of the doer, [in this case] one does not need such steps [of admonition], and a preacher is in duty bound to attack this kind of notorious person specifically. 1 Tim. 5[:20], "Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest may also fear." But let him not allow private emotions to creep in and thus soil the divine Word with human excrement, as Dr. Luther says. Faculty of Leipzig.

Dunte and the Theological Faculty of Leipzig make clear, again, that the steps of admonition of Matthew 18 apply to secret sins. The text that applies to public sins is not Matthew 18:15–16, but instead, 1 Timothy 5:20. Dunte also stresses the preacher's duty to rebuke sins. Cases of church discipline are dealt with above the congregational level, by the ministerium together with lay leaders.

WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

In 1664, the theological faculty of the University of Wittenberg published a collection of faculty decisions on all kinds of questions. The title of the book, translated, reads,

Consilia Theologica Witebergensia, that is, Wittenberg Spiritual Counsels: Judgments, Counsels, and Public Writings of the precious Man of God, Dr. Martin Luther, his colleagues, and faithful successors, from the beginning of the holy Reformation up until the present time, in four parts: ON CASES OF RELIGION, doctrine and faith; cases relating to the MINISTRY and the church; MORAL and criminal cases; and MATRIMONIAL and marriage cases; categorized and published for the glory of God, the preservation of the pure doctrine, and the use of the Evangelical Lutheran Churches, at the request of many, by the Theological Faculty there.¹⁹

In 1664, when the *Wittenberg Theological Counsels* were published, the theological faculty at Wittenberg consisted of Abraham Calov (1612–1686), Johann Andreas Quenstedt (1617–1688), Johannes Deutschmann (1625–1706), and Johannes Meisner (1615–1681). At the time, Meisner was the provost and senior of the faculty.²⁰

The *Wittenberg Theological Counsels* have much to say about church discipline, the steps of admonition, and the preacher's duty to rebuke sin. An opinion dated May 10, 1606, describes how a pastor, Ern Fabianus, was removed from office.²¹ The

steps of admonition were used. This Ern Fabianus was rumored to have been involved with the "monthly usury" (*Monats-Wucher*), which was apparently also a civil crime.²² At this, the superintendent, one Conradus, had a talk with him "and reminded and warned him henceforth to stay away from this unchristian practice (*Wesen*)." The Wittenberg faculty says that Fabianus should have accepted this well-intentioned warning with gentleness. Instead, Fabianus resisted the superintendent with harsh words. It seems, then, that the ministerium confronted him in the same way, but with no success, whereupon they suspended Fabianus from office. According to the *Counsels*, this all was in keeping with Matthew 18.

The text that applies to public sins is not Matthew 18, but 1 Timothy 5:20.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that Fabianus had been suspended, he did not repent. Instead, even having been warned three times, he persisted in despising the ministerium and the leaders of the church. The faculty advised the ministerium to proceed as their *Pomeranian Church Order* and God's Word directed, that is, to excommunicate him as a usurer, one who despised knowledge, and who was defiant towards the ministry and presbytery (apparently, lay elders). This excommunication was a suspension from the Lord's Supper for a time (*ad tempus*). In reaction to this, however, Fabianus took the case to civil court, for which the Wittenberg faculty reproached him, since this was not a civil case, they said, but purely an ecclesiastical one.

The faculty was especially upset about the civil case. If Fabianus's appeal to the courts was to have succeeded, then never again would the ministerium be able to enact church discipline against one sinning publicly. Nor would the ministerium be able to exercise collegial discipline (*collegialem disciplinam*) among themselves. They would have lost all bands, "which, then, is and is called nothing other than trying to stop the Holy Spirit in his office (*Ambt*), mixing and confusing the spiritual and secular into one another." All Christian rulers should beware of this and consider that God, at all times, has earnestly punished lands and peoples for this kind of confusion. The faculty was certain that the government officials to whom they were writing already knew this and had already come to the same conclusion.

In order for Fabianus to be restored to communion, the faculty suggested that he be brought before a gathering of the ministerium and elders with a "peaceful and impartial" man of the prince's choosing to act as "director of the negotiation," what we might call a reconciler. Fabianus was to be admonished again, so that he might recognize his "excess." If he apologized to the ministerium and to the church publicly, and if this were accepted by the ministerium, then the suspension from communion should be lifted. Whatever civil penalties he may have incurred for practicing usury were not, however, lifted. If he was recon-

ciled to the ministerium, then he was to be treated as an emeritus pastor, at least with respect to his pay. Negotiations would take place as to what his living stipend would be. It appears from this, however, that reinstatement as a pastor was not in view.

But if Fabianus remained stiff-necked, he should be suspended from office for a while "and be forbidden to preach and to perform all other ministerial acts: Perhaps the case would be that he might be won over through these means." If this didn't work, he should be immediately removed from office and another qualified man set in his place. In future cases of this sort, the faculty concluded, it would not be necessary to convene the consistory or appeal to theologians (faculty opinions). Apparently, the ministerium and elders would be able to act in such a matter without calling in those from outside the region.

From the case of Ern Fabianus we see how the steps of admonition in Matthew 18 were put into practice in the early seventeenth century. It was the ecclesiastical supervisor's duty, or at least right, to carry out the first step of admonition. The local pastors (ministerium) together with the local lay leaders were involved, finally, as the group that was authorized to suspend Fabianus from office and from the Lord's Supper. Appeal could then be made to the consistory or to a theological faculty.

The *Wittenberg Theological Counsels* also note the distinction between secret and public sins. On January 6, 1619, the dean, senior, and other doctors and professors of theology wrote that the steps of admonition (*gradus admonitionis*) do not apply when the sins are notorious and known by all. In these situations, the applicable Bible verse is, "The one who is sinning, rebuke before all" (1 Tim 5:20). Mention is also made of 2 Timothy 4—perhaps verse 2 is in mind, "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching." The faculty continues by saying that where the sin is known only to a few, then the steps of admonition must be followed.²³

It has already been shown that in the seventeenth-century Lutheran mind, a distinction is commonly made between secret sins and public sins. Nevertheless, the reputation of others and the Eighth Commandment were taken seriously. A faculty opinion from July 26, 1619, deals with

whether sin and evil-doing, or else embarrassing plans to do evil, may be reported by a good Christian to the spiritual or secular government (according to the kind of situation it is), or whether this should be regarded as betrayal?²⁴

This is a question concerning the grounds on which one may report the evils of others, thus, in some way, defaming them. The answer given begins, "Sin and evil-doing, or secret plans to do evil, can be revealed in two ways: in a sinful way and in a praise-worthy way."

It would be sin to reveal the evils of others if they are secret, if it is revealed in order to defame the neighbor, or if it is reported to those to whom it does not concern. In these cases, reporting the evil-doing of others would be a sin against the Eighth Commandment and would conflict with Christian love, which, according to 1 Corinthians 7 and 13, bears all things, hopes all things, and so forth. If someone has not offended others with his

sin (that is, others do not know about it) then the Christian thing to do is not to tell others about it, but to reproach the sinner privately. This is what it means to "carry each other's burden," and, as St. Paul says in Galatians 6:1-2, "If a man is overtaken in any trespass, help correct such a one in a spirit of gentleness."

However, the foregoing does not apply to all cases. It would not be sin, but would rather be praiseworthy, if one were to report notorious (*nahmhafter*) and offensive sins and evil-doing, or secret sins from which evil can come, to those to whom it pertains, that is, the spiritual or secular "parents," teachers, and the like, whose office it is to fight against evil, so that the one practicing evil would be stopped in time, offense would be prevented, and evil rumors—which can be very harmful to a whole generation (*Geschlecht*) and congregation—would be stopped. Biblical examples of reporting sins of others without using the steps of admonition are Genesis 37:2, where Joseph brought a bad report of his brothers to his father; 2 Samuel 15:13, where a messenger told David of Absalom's revolt; 2 Samuel 17:15-21, where a report was brought to David about Absalom's evil plans; Esther 2:22, where Mordecai reported a secret plot; and Acts 23:16, where St. Paul's nephew reported to him the assassination plot of the Jews. Revealing these kinds of evils, the faculty states, actually helps to prevent great damage from taking place and are a part of Christian love. Christian love does not rejoice when evil takes place, but, when it probably would take place, it rejoices to call for justice, help prevent damage, and promote the general welfare. Therefore, revealing such things is by no means betrayal. Nor is it a sin against the Eighth Commandment.

Revealing these kinds of evils actually helps to prevent great damage from taking place and are a part of Christian love.

From this it is apparent that for the Wittenberg faculty it was by no means necessary to use the steps of admonition in the case of public sins. In fact, there are even secret sins where the steps of admonition do not apply. In all of these cases, the church government did not have to wait "until Matthew 18 was carried out" before taking disciplinary action.

This very fact is especially obvious in the case of Zacharias Drendeler. On October 17, 1635, the dean, senior, and doctors of the theological faculty at Wittenberg responded to a question about a certain layman, Zacharias Drendeler, who had been excommunicated publicly (escorted out of church during the Sunday morning service, as was the custom in those days), for showing up to private confession drunk and yelling at the pastors in the church in the presence of other people who were there for private confession (*Beicht-Kinder*). He had previously

been warned about his evil life in the sermon, though not face-to-face, and not by name. His excommunication, however, took place without any foregoing steps of admonition specifically and in private (*gradus admonitionum in specie und privatim*). The response of the faculty was as follows: It would have been better to warn him privately before the excommunication, since this would be more likely to bring about repentance; nevertheless, the excommunication was valid, it needed to happen, and the faculty did not want to stop it from happening.²⁵

It is clear that the faculty did not view the steps of admonition from Matthew 18 as so necessary that a valid excommunication could not occur without them.

From this example it is quite clear that the faculty did not view the steps of admonition from Matthew 18 as so necessary that a valid excommunication could not occur without them. The purpose for the steps of admonition is the repentance of the sinner, not to function as a "churchly version of the Miranda rights." Even though the pastors should have used the steps of admonition, their failure to use them did not invalidate their action to enforce the church discipline that was needed.

On February 6, 1662, the *Decanus Senior* (presumably Joh. Meisner) answered the question of whether a preacher must follow some specific procedure before preaching against public sins.²⁶ Does he need permission from the secular government? Does he need permission from his fellow preachers?

The first question was answered strongly in the negative. Under no circumstance does the preacher need permission from the government in order to preach against public sins. The foundation for Meisner's answer lies in the institution of the office of the holy ministry. He writes,

Concerning the first question, we set this forth as the foundation, that the office of preachers has been commanded to them by God himself with great seriousness, at the risk of losing divine grace and their salvation, that they may not remain silent about the sins and vices of the people, but rather are to rebuke (*straffen*) them from God's Word, yet with the moderation and discretion demanded by the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 5 and 2 Timothy 4, not from private emotions and self-seeking zeal, nor from one's own desire for revenge or similar causes, but only for the correction (*Besserung*) of the sinner and the edification of the whole congregation.

Next, Meisner distinguishes between different kinds of sins.

But at this point it stands to reason that a distinction be made between the duty of rebuking evil practice and con-

duct in general, and the correction which is directed to individuals; then also between public sins and vice which are known by everyone in the congregation, and those which are still hidden and known only to a few. As far as the public and well-known sins and sinners are concerned, a preacher is to rebuke them publicly, without respect of persons [that is, no matter who they are], whether they are of low or high [social] standing.

Luther is quoted next, defending the freedom of pastors to exercise their rebuking office. "Whoever wants to be a right preacher," he is quoted as saying,

and conduct his ministry faithfully, must retain for himself the freedom to speak the truth boldly, no matter who they are, and rebuke where rebuke must happen: great and small, rich, poor, powerful, friends and foes.

Again, Luther says,

If they want to be called "brothers," that is, Christians, then they must let their sins be rebuked, confess them, and correct themselves. But if they want to defend their sins as being rightly done, then they are confessing that they are not Christians, but rather persecutors and foes of divine doctrine. In this case we will soon let ourselves be satisfied with the situation and will be ready to suffer all from them—as from foes, but not as from brothers.

Preachers must carry out their ministry in preaching, teaching and rebuking, comforting, admonishing, and so forth, no matter whether it is a favorable time or an unfavorable time (2 Tim 4:2) and whether it pleases or displeases the wise and powerful of this world. And they do not have to report this to the government previously in writing or by mouth, nor confer with politicians, since the latter could easily say that now is not the right time to proceed in such a sharp manner. The politicians could easily say that one must delay a little while, give a nod, and tolerate something. In all of this, the main idea is that preachers can rebuke public sins, period. No one can stop them. In the case under consideration, it was the civil government that was trying to silence the voice of rebuke. But the principle should hold true, no matter who it is that attempts to do the same.

According to Meisner, the reasons for the office of the holy ministry's being free to rebuke are scriptural. The ministers are servants of Christ and messengers in the place of God (1 Cor 4; 2 Cor 5), and God has given them a commandment on how they are to carry out their ministry. The ministers can preach against [public] sins, vices, dangerous doctrine, and shameful life, and do not have to wait to do this until they have reported it to the authorities and have had it recognized as right and valid by them. Meisner writes,

The rebuking office is also an office of the Holy Spirit, who rebukes the world through faithful teachers and preachers, John 16. What man will give orders to the Holy Spirit, or prescribe moderation or an end (*Ziel*) as to how he should

carry out his rebuking-office in the church? What man will shut his mouth and bind his hands, so that he no longer rebukes the world for sin?

Therefore, when the secular authorities forbid the clergy from preaching or rebuking something without their approval, they are "meddling in someone else's office" (*allogriepiscopos*, 1 Pet 4:15). The case of Uzziah (2 Chr 26) is cited,

And although it [the secular government] is the protector and supporter of the church and her servants, nevertheless the servants of the divine word do not exercise an office concerning which the government can give orders. Indeed, the secular government, as well as others, must be subject to the holy ministerium in the kingdom of Christ and recognize themselves as subordinate.

When preachers rebuke from the pulpit, when it is necessary and done with a right intention, for the right purpose, and with cutting zeal, then the politicians must not strive against God's order by limiting them. At the time it was the politicians who were limiting the rebuking office. Yet it is interesting that Meisner does not argue for his position so much from the separation of church and state, but rather from the institution of the office of the holy ministry.

Next, Meisner distinguishes public and secret sins.

But if the sin which must be rebuked is known only to a few people and concerns one certain person, then the preacher should not bring it immediately to the pulpit, seeing that in such a way an offense would be set before the congregation and the wicked man would thereby be hardened much more than he would be led to repentance.

Here again, the outcome of repentance is what is most important.

Instead, the steps of admonition (*gradus admonitionum*) should be observed, rebuking him privately from God's Word and faithfully admonishing him to repent. If this mild and friendly admonition accomplishes nothing, he [the preacher] can communicate it with one or the other of his colleagues in the preaching office (*Predigt-Ambt*), and with their assistance urge the wicked one earnestly regarding the redress of his offensive and dangerous conduct.

Here are the first and second steps: Matthew 18:15-16. If these steps do not help, then the preacher is to report the wicked one to the government to be punished. Here it can be assumed that the crime under consideration would be of the illegal sort in order for this to happen. The government officials must also, according to Meisner, be reminded of their duty to punish crime. From this point on, the preacher is no longer bound to keep silent, but must publicly rebuke this kind of sinful man, "although without naming him," for some reason. In doing so, however, the preacher should combine zeal with knowledge, so that he does not become guilty of Romans 10:2.

The second question under consideration was whether a preacher must also confer with his fellow pastors and follow

their advice before exercising his correcting office (*officium Epanorthoticum*) by preaching against notorious sins from the pulpit. The answer given is,

If the matter is doubtful and important, the pastor acts well and prudently when he speaks about it with his colleagues and gets their opinion on it. It also has a better impression when evil customs and blasphemies, which have spread, are attacked and rebuked with a united hand, and one does not attempt to take up the work alone.

In addition, then, church conventions (*conventus Ecclesiastici*) are especially useful, in which there can be discussion of one or the other doubtful and important matter. "But if the vice is public and manifest, and there is nothing doubtful about it, then it is not necessary that he consult with his colleagues about it and follow their advice." Thus far the *Wittenberg Theological Counsels*.

From the faculty decisions given in the *Wittenberg Theological Counsels*, it becomes clear that the faculty, over the course of almost a century, defended the preacher's duty and freedom to rebuke sin and practice church discipline. The steps of admonition according to Matthew 18 were applied to secret sins, not public sins. The purpose of these steps was to make repentance easier by keeping a secret sin secret. In addition, church discipline was decided at a level above the local congregation, usually by the ministerium together with lay leaders.

WALTHER

C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the LCMS, valued and promoted church discipline. After quoting Matthew 18:15-17, he exclaims,

O blessed congregation, where this fraternal admonition and reproach holds sway! But woe to that congregation where it is omitted! There, despite the richest and purest preaching of the word of God, corruption will eventually take the upper hand. It will eventually be spiritually ruined. For every congregation is like a body: if not all members there want to do their duty, then necessarily the entire body will eventually die and decay.²⁷

Walther likewise insists on the duty of preachers, in particular, to practice church discipline. He writes in his *Pastoral Theology*,

It is the preacher's duty to administer the means of grace to his congregation not only as a teacher but also as a watchman, bishop, shepherd, leader, etc., of the congregation; to see to it that God's Word is followed there in every way and that the Christian discipline commanded in God's Word is practiced (Mt 18:15-17; 7:16; Rv 2:2, 14-15, 20; 1 Tim 1:20; 3:5; 5:20; 1 Cor 5:1-5, 9-13; 2 Cor 2:6-11; 2 Th 3:14-15). Church discipline with respect to life [as opposed to doctrine] can sometimes fall into decline, even in an orthodox church, without it ceasing to be orthodox, because the wicked have the upper hand in it (1 Cor 5:1-2).²⁸

Walther, like Luther in the Large Catechism, makes a distinction between secret and public sins. He writes,

If the sin of a congregation member is so manifest that the whole congregation knows it and is offended by it, it is not necessary to retain the stages of admonition indicated in Matthew 18. For in this case the congregation is the one of whom the Lord says: "If thy brother shall sin against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone" (Mt 18:15). So we read that, after Peter had given public offense Paul rebuked him, not in stages, but right away "before them all," publicly (Gal 2:13-14).²⁹

Walther has followed the lines of the Large Catechism, but has also added a biblical example that illustrates the distinction between secret and public sins: the dispute between St. Paul and St. Peter in Galatians 2.

CONCLUSION

In summary, what can be learned from the casuistry and confessional literature of early Lutheranism about the steps of admonition in Matthew 18:15-16? First, the authors cited do not

always mention that the steps of admonition do not apply to public sins. Second, the purpose of the steps is to keep a secret sin secret, thus making repentance easier. Third, Matthew 18:15-16 does not serve as a sort of Miranda rights, according to which one must act in every situation, in order for church discipline to be valid. Even if the steps are omitted where they do apply, that does not excuse the sinner, nor is it grounds for church discipline to cease. Fourth, Matthew 18:15-16 applies to some, but not all, cases of church discipline. It does not apply to public sins. Fifth, the office of the holy ministry must, under all circumstances, retain the freedom to fulfill its God-given duty of rebuking sin and being a steward of God's mysteries.

The Lutheran Confessions, together with the casuistry and pastoral theology literature examined here, say that there is a distinction between secret sins and public sins. To claim that the steps of admonition according to Matthew 18 apply indiscriminately to all cases of church discipline is an innovation in light of the works examined. There is no precedent within the Lutheran Confessions, C. F. W. Walther, Porta's *Pastoral Theology*, or the seventeenth century theological faculty decisions of Leipzig and Wittenberg that have been examined, to apply Matthew 18:15-16 to public, manifest sins.³⁰ LOGIA

NOTES

1. For example, Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); John MacArthur Jr., *Matthew 16-23* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988); Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).
2. R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1932), 679.
3. Kurt Aland, *Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium*, 4th ed. (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1996), 254.
4. "Wenn nun solches *an dich* gelangt, *du* merkst solches, so strafe ihn zwischen ihm und dir. Du sollst ihn nicht öffentlich und auf dem Markt, oder wo bist du, vor jedermann nicht ausschreien, sondern gedenken, daß er gleichwohl dein Bruder sei, und bei andern das Maul halten und zu ihm gehen, ihn allein vor dich nehmen, freundlich vermahnen und strafen" (SL 7: 920, emphasis added).
5. *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1875-1912), s.v. "Porta, Conrad."
6. Conrad Porta, *Pastorale Lutheri* (Eisleben: Petri, 1582; reprint, Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1842), 126.
7. Jena edition, vol. 2, fol. 372; New edition, 375 (*Epistel S. Petri gepredigt und ausgelegt D. M. Luther*, 1523. See WA 12: 259-399; SL 9: 958-1297).
8. Porta, *Pastorale*, 174-176.
9. *Ibid.*, 177.
10. *Ibid.*, 406.
11. *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexicon*, www.bautz.de/bbkl, s.v. "Sarcerius, Erasmus," last updated 3/11/1999.
12. Porta, *Pastorale*, 406-407.
13. *Ibid.*, 407.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 577.
16. Ludwig Dunte, *Decisiones mille et sex casuum conscientiae* (Ratzeburg auffm Dohm, 1664).
17. See Johann Georg Walch, *Bibliotheca theologica selecta* (Jena: Sumtu viduae Croeckerianae, 1757-1765), 2:1128.
18. Dunte, *Decisiones*, 171.
19. Theological faculty of the University of Wittenberg, *Consilia theologica witebergensia, Das ist, Wittenbergische Geistliche Rathschläge deß theuren Mannes Gottes, D. Martini Lutheri, seiner Collegen, und treuen Nachfolger, von dem heiligen Reformationen-Anfang, biß auff jetzige Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Balthasar Christoph Wust, 1664).
20. BBKL, www.bautz.de/bbkl, s.v. "Meisner, Johannes," last updated, 7/13/1998.
21. *Consilia theologica witebergensia*, 2:208-209.
22. Grimm's *Wörterbuch* reports that by the turn of the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, interest of up to 5% was permitted according to imperial and regional law. The word *Wucher* came to mean the illegal charging of interest above and beyond 5 percent. Interest below 5 percent was called *Zins(en)*. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Band 14, Teil 2, ed. Ludwig Sütterlin (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1960; reprint, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 1694.
23. *Ibid.*, 2:99-100.
24. *Ibid.*, 3:155-156.
25. *Ibid.*, 2:99.
26. *Ibid.*, 2:93-94.
27. C. F. W. Walther, *Gnadenjahr: Predigten über die Evangelien des Kirchenjahrs* (St. Louis: Lutherischer Concordia-Verlag, 1890), 555-556.
28. C. F. W. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, trans. John M. Drickamer (New Haven, MO: Lutheran News, Inc., 1995), 234.
29. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, 240. As to the meaning of "offended," I would take it to mean not so much that people are angry about it, but more that an evil example has been given which, if unchecked, could cause others to do likewise and thus "stumble."
30. Those interested in the patristic tradition should consult St. Augustine, *Sermon 32*. From this sermon it is clear that the Large Catechism agrees with Augustine's exegesis of Matthew 18:15-16.